

THE USE OF THE FIGURATIVE ELEMENT IN GLASS

Documentation of research into Contemporary Figurative works
emerging from the Studio Glass Movement.

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PREFACE

The reproduction of the figure emerges from the earliest known rock drawings and is featured where ever men and women have sought to express themselves visually, whether it is in story-telling, recording of history, ritual and religious use, or self expression.

Our sense of identification with the representation of our own form is irrepressible. From birth our first visual recognition is of the bodies and faces of our parents, and from there we assemble faces and figures from the formations of clouds, the moon, rock cliffs and even the surface of Mars.

The swiftness of our recognition of our own form leaves the figure as a limitless image to create, recreate, distort and disect, to dismember and segment and yet still to spur a response of recognition and identification.

In 1982 an exhibition, curated by H.Ricke and Bernstein Magon, and including works by René Roubicek, David Reekie, John Heald Cook, Blanka Adensamova, Erwin Eisch, Don Shepherd, and others was assembled. This exhibition covered a vast range of techniques and intent, the theme being "The Human Image as Metaphore and Symbol".

In their article on the exhibition, they state that their interest for this exhibition was sparked by the movement they perceived from the works of Cros, Ringel d'Illjach and George Despret which they state "were still based on the framework of traditional crafts categories of appeal and material effect of glass." through to "our time, in which glass increasingly sought emancipation as an artist's not just a craftsmans medium, the fact that the human image as archetype of this artistic design assumes primary importance is in itself significant. A small selection of the attempts of contemporary artists to approach this central theme should indicate the complexity of levels of significance and the variety of prospects of the medium".¹ It is these attempts by contemporary artists that I am detailing in this paper. I am examining the complexity and variety of significance given to the figure within the medium of glass.

This move by many contemporary artists away from the distinctly decorative corresponds with the move of glass from a primarily craftsman's material to a blending of the borders between the Fine and the Decorative arts.

INTRODUCTION

In the vast history of figurative stained glass and also of Roman vessels, one cannot ignore their roles not only in decoration but of storytelling. Visual representation of myths, legends and histories held roles in hugely illiterate communities that is difficult for us to comprehend in our time.

A great many of these early workers with glass, certainly expressed themselves, their ideas and emotions in their work, the constraints of their time and traditions notwithstanding. It is not my purpose to deny nor limit their creativity but rather to view the variety of purposes to which the figure has been put.

It is far more a result of our location in history that contemporary artists more frequently produce works whose sole purpose is to express the heart and mind of the producer. For these reasons I have looked exclusively at twentieth century glass workers, in particular those from the Studio Glass Movement which has enabled artists to have a wider range of options in their chosen field.

How then does one determine what is or what is not figurative? At first the answer appears obvious, however like any form of classification there is blurring at the edges. Where does one place works such as some of those by Bretislav Novák, jr, or Howard Ben Tré, which do not portray a figure but are created with human proportions? Also more abstracted work such as that of Robert Kehlman and his stained glass Compositions XXXIX & XXXI. Again these works are not figurative in any literal sense but the placement of form and line leads the viewer to think of human forms and interactions. Our response to the figure is so deeply established that recognition and reproduction may often emerge without intent.

This paper has emerged out of my interest in figurative work, both in my own work and in that of others, and is a recording of my research into the figurative works of other artists, drawing my examples from those who choose to produce their images in glass.

From within the theme of Figurative I have distinguished three specific roles given to the figure across a variety of works. Therefore for this paper I have grouped artists according to their bias toward one or more of these roles, from the way that she or he has chosen to use the figure in specific works. The examples I have used are to illustrate the variety of purposes of figurative art not to classify the artists themselves.

These groupings are,

1. the figure as decorative
2. the figure as narrative
3. the figure as expression

Clearly these groups have overlaps and in fact most figurative work could easily be placed in 2 or more of these groups. However, most have significant leanings to one of the three enabling a loose form of classification. It is more correct to recognise these groupings not as categories but as distinguishing elements present in the works.

SECTION 1 The Figure as Decorative

For the purpose of this paper, I have taken the definition of decorative as that which is ornamental, or for embellishment. In all my examples the figure is intrinsic to the piece, no less a part of the whole than the form, but it has as its intent the embellishment of the form (or desk or car) rather than the relationship of the figure to the viewer. The work is to be looked at and enjoyed for its beauty, rather than to initiate a thought process or emotional response.

Glass is a medium which lends itself naturally to use as decoration. The malleability of the molten metal and the range of qualities possible in the final piece has meant that a huge realm of work in glass- from painted vessels with country scenes, to engravings from Shakespeare or Greek legends, and also commemorative portrait medallions or even pressed heads of Elvis have been produced.

As perceived by Helmut Ricke and Bernstein Magon, much of the glass produced prior to the middle of the twentieth century was produced with a primarily decorative intention. Glass was predominantly a traditional craftsman's medium, and the figure used to enhance the beauty of a vessel or on its own as a beautiful ornament for a desk or even a car. The work of René Lalique seems a prime example of this. Lalique's works are destined to grace the table or mantle, to hold the gaze for their fine and delicate qualities. His works include Art Nouveau nymphs, mermaids and trailing vines, and also Art Deco designs, with geometric friezes and angular forms, reflecting the periods in which he worked which had a primary focus in design. The figures exploit the sensuous nature of the glass producing a delicacy and softness through the frosted glass as his figures curve around the forms. The figures (predominantly female) are beautiful and graceful, as are the fish, the birds, the flowers and the animals. It appears that Lalique's choice of the figure for his work was based on appearances of beauty and grace, without any other purpose, representation or intent.

It may now be appropriate in the 90's to bring some questions to the use of figure, particularly the female figure as simply an object for the gaze. It is unlikely however, that Lalique or his contemporaries questioned this use of the female form during the first half of this century. This change of consciousness I believe is in part responsible for

the less prevalent use of the figure as a predominantly decorative element. It is significantly less common to find figurative ornament on contemporary vessels than on those made prior to the twentieth century.

Proir to Lalique, significant work in glass was being produced by Henri Cros. As well as working with the disciplines of painting, ceramics and sculpture, Cros created many works in glass after redeveloping the techniques of Paté de verre, based on the Egyptian uses of glass paste. Cros used glass because of its qualities of translucency, and the softness and delicacy of the colours he was able to obtain. In addition to portrait medallions and busts Cros's themes were predominantly classical. His use of the figure in the former works was primarily decorative. The latter included portraits which were beautifully expressive of individuals and reliefs which portrayed classical myths. There are obvious links of tradition from Cros to the Roman glass workers referred to earlier, where the representation of individuals or legendary figures become the vehicle for the artists expression.

In the contemporary Studio Glass Movement it has more recognisably been those using the more traditional methods of glass engraving who have continued in the use of the figure as a predominantly decorative element. An example of this is Australia's Anne Dybka who uses her skill in an illustrative way. Her painstakingly depicted scenes from Shakespeare's Tempest portray the classic play, and the figures are recognisable and expressive in their given roles, not existing for themselves as vehicles of expression. Another engraver, Jirí Hrcuba coming from a history of medallion making and the traditions of Czechoslovakian glass, creates sensitive portraits whose intention is to portray the individual and to present him or her to the viewer rather than relating these figures to the viewer on a general level.

Lutz Haufschild is specific in his intent to use the figure to a decorative effect. In particular his work at the entrance to Toronto's Skydome Stadium, "Baseball". Haufschild has depicted life size Baseball players in action to provide a human scale in a huge building. Haufschild is conscious of his audience responding to the works ability to humanise the stadium. In her article in Neues Glass, Gloria Hickey states that he is successful in making "the tangible connection between the viewer and his locale -the raw material for a sense of community that has been eclipsed by the automobile".² The stories told by the baseballers do give a narrative bias to the work but its primary focus is to function decoratively within the site.

SECTION 2 Figure as Narrative

The category of figure as narrative could be an inexhaustable one if I were to include the historical and current histories of stained glass. However I feel the history here is a separate and complex one as alluded to in the introduction. Therefore, I have continued to draw examples from the contemporary Studio Glass Movement.

In this chapter I have grouped works in which the figure is recognisable, if perhaps only by the artist as a character in their story. The works function to inform the viewer of an event as in Dana Zamecnikova's works or of an idea as in those of Mary Van Cline. These figures interact with the viewer through the information they convey. They exist to speak to the viewer, as an intermediary from the artist.

Despite the decorative features of amusing charicatures in bold colours Richard Bernstein's work leans most strongly towards the narrative, as the viewer, once past the initial amusement at his cartoon-like images discovers in them a sense of frustration with contemporary society. His figures jitter with nervousness and angst, victims of various modern psychoses, as household appliances become articles of torture- phones strangle, toasters electrocute and dogs bite. In an article on Richard Bernstein, Ben Mark's comments that "this is the way we get pleasure in contemporary society, laughter and joy have been reduced to cocktail party commodities that are aquired solely at another's expense." ³ The amusing images have a bitter message.

Other artists have specifically taken on the role of story teller in the creation of their works.

Dana Zamecnikova intentionally works in a narrative way. She creates scenes through the layering of plate glass, expressly reminiscent of the theatre. Each work portrays a situation or event from her life. The figures are inherent in the story telling, like the actors on a stage. Her works express the laughter and sadness of daily life, some with unexpected turns, other with a sense of the commonplace, the depiction of life as it is.

Zamecnikova is intent in portraying two major themes. The first being her attempt to suggest infinite space. Her layering is remenicent of Baroque stage designs and she uses this to create her theatre-like stages where space is confined but yet suggests infinity. Then, within this defined

from 1987 "Her Dream Was to be a Journalist" tells of his mother whose dream was replaced with the reality of a marriage and six sons. Karen Chambers outlines the work in Neues Glass, "The cast figure with outstretched arms and insistent frontality recalls a terra-cotta statuette of a Minoan snake goddess of around 1600 BC. The resemblance is reinforced by the enormous almond-shaped eyes seen in the painted profile face and the larger cast head of Palusky's piece as well as in the clay goddess. The similarity of these two was not premeditated, but must result from two artists' desire to create a powerful but supplicating figure. Palusky's stands on a rocker-like base, emphasising the instability of her position. The stiffness of her body communicates both her awareness of the situation (the tension between the reality of her life versus her dream) and her fear of falling from the base (failing in her fantasy career?). Silhouettes of figures float in the laminated plate glass base and hairy-tired wheels reinforce the cyclical, routine quality of her real life."⁷ Information is provided graphically, and Palusky's mother's story can be read through symbol and reference. Other works tell other stories, including "Bad Boy (Basquiat), telling of a young New York graffiti artist.

Although some works are less clearly narrative, eg "Above all else Confusion Reigns", the figures continue to provoke questions as to their roles and purposes, the story is still there but harder to find.

There are elements of the ritual and hints of the totemic in many of Robert Palusky's sculptures with the existence of the figure representing other people or other ideas.

SECTION 3 Figure as Expression

This third grouping includes works which have as their intent a visceral response. Some, such as the doors of Bonnie Biggs also function in a more conventional way but the figures call for an emotional identification. The initial response from the viewer is based in the emotions. The artist is using the work as a vehicle, not to present a specific idea so much as to present a feeling, to express her or his emotions in a way that is recognised by the viewer.

A part of the response to the recent works by Ann Wolff is evoked by their hint at the ritualistic and totemic. Glass bodies and heads stand supported by iron limbs, evoking ideas of ancient spiritualism and meaning. Gesture becomes the vehicle of expression. Ann Wolff's work has always focused around the themes of female sexuality incorporating the mother goddess, and female roles.

The vessel also, takes on symbolic qualities in her hands. For Wolff the funnel and triangular nature of the goblet relate to female fertility. Always in keeping with her themes, Ann Wolff has processed through a variety of techniques. Early figures were engraved, etched and sandblasted, and blown using graal techniques. Her imagery was symbolic and referential and strongly narrative. Since the 80's Ann Wolff no longer works exclusively with glass but also produces and exhibits drawings and prints.

In conjunction with her expansion of disciplines, her use of the figurative elements has altered. Retaining their symbolic references, they have become less representational, more archetypal. They express meaning and emotion through gesture and presence rather than through narrative depictions. Coinciding with these changes came her decision to change her name from Wärrf to Wolff (her grandmother's name) suggesting a purposeful change in direction and expression.

Amongst a variety of new mediums and formats, Ann Wolff has retained the open bowl, however as Verena Tafel suggests in her article in *Neues Glass* "the illustrative element has slid into the background. The human face, more precisely the woman's face has replaced the narrative in the glasswork and in the works on paper. The head now looks out compellingly from the bottom of the bowl. Head-on, with black outlined eyes, she casts a sphinx-like spell over the viewer." ⁸

In the work of Bonnie Biggs glass functions as both a pictorial and sculptural medium. Her work in the early 80's has comprised of drawings strewn with various materials and fused between layers of plate glass.

Although this sometimes proved exciting, Bonnie Biggs has now altered her methods to provide a more predictable process, though following the same figurative themes. In a low temperature fusing process Bonnie Biggs is able to include various materials including paper and hair in her drawings as well as lines with felt tip pens. This has enabled the works increased reliance on the drawings rather than the unpredictable firings. Alongside this process her subjects have moved through personal emotionalism through narrative ideas, to figures expressing energy, hope and a feeling of transcendence. In reproduction the works give the immediate appearance of drawings, but they move within the surface rather than upon it, providing greater depth and a new dimension.

Stephen Dale Edwards has also worked with a variety of materials and techniques with glass, including blown glasswork, painting, casting and engraving, in his attempts to represent the figure. Through all of these he states that his intention in his work is "to tap basic feelings with conscious and subconscious messages." ⁹ It is surely a sign of his success in achieving this, that Bonnie J. Miller in her *Neues Glass* review comments "his new work, especially, evokes a visceral response before it solicits an intellectual one." ¹⁰

Edwards' choice of glass as the medium for his work is due to its linkage with his subject matter. The glass is able to infuse his figures with a glow and a vitality of life adding weight to the expressions and gestures of his figures. The textures of his glass enables these expressions to change with light and the angle of the viewer, the depth and reflection of the glass apparently altering. The surface of his work invoking a response that is felt before it is thought.

It is this expressive quality that most intrigues me. The challenge to evoke a visceral response, that is immediately striking, but that develops and strengthens with time and familiarity with the work.

CONCLUSION

As stated by Ricke and Magon, there is a variety of prospects of the medium of glass and complex levels of significance centered around a central theme. The extent of the use of the figure in no way diminishes the response to it. For each artist the figure carries new and differing meanings and so is depicted with a variety of intent. The research documented by this paper is not conclusive but rather continuous, as I have selected only a very small number of the many glass artists who have worked with the figure, and always that number is growing.

POST SCRIPT

It is a point worth noting that the weight of my examples are derived from America. This is a result from my taking as the basis for my research contemporary glass publications. Although most are not American publications, American artists are strongly featured. It is not my intention to detail the myriad of reasons for this American bias, other than to state its existence and recognise its effect on my knowledge of worldwide contemporary glass work.

APPENDIX

Relating this Paper to My Work.

The Glass : I am attracted by the qualities of cast glass: it's weight, the depth of it's colour, and it's diffusion of light.

The Figure: It is the expressive possibilities of the figure that most intrigues me. The challenge to evoke a visceral response, that is immediately striking, but that develops and strengthens with time and familiarity with the work.

For me the reproduction of the figure provokes various levels of identification and I have used this in combination with the qualities of the glass as an expression of the inner spirit.

The Works: I do intend the works to provoke a visceral response and identification for the viewer, uniting the commonality of emotion and the solitude in which it is expressed.

The cast vessels are titled in series, **Valediction: Of Weeping**

They have been cast in crystal in the 'cire perdue' method. The rims of the four largest works are lined with lead. The smaller, more contained works in the series, are lustre-painted on the inner surface.

The reliefs are untitled.

They are cast in an open mould, and painted with glass enamels, and stains, framed with or inset into fence palings.



NOTES

- 1 Ricke, Helmut
Magon, Bernstein
'The Human Image in Glass'
Neues Glas vno 2 p 61-67 1982
- 2 Hickey, Gloria
'Public Art of Lutz Haufschild: connecting Man
and his Environment'
Neues Glas vno4 p276-80 Oct/Dec 1988
- 3 Marks, Ben
'Ricky Bernstein'
Glasswork vno7 Dec1990 p25
- 4 Miller, Bonnie J.
'Transforming Time - A Closer Look At Mary Van
Cline'
Neues Glas vno2 p97-102 Ap/Jun 1989
- 5 Chambers, Karen
'Robert Palusky, A Thinking Man's Artist'
Glass Work vno4 p 8-11 Jan 1990
- 6 ibid
- 7 ibid
- 8 Tafel, Verena
'Discoveries and Changes: New Works by Ann
Wolff'
Neues Glas vno4 p258-265 Oct/Dec 1986
- 9 Miller, Bonnie J.
'Stephen Dale Edwards: New Faces'
Neues Glas vno3 p180-3 Jul/Sept 1986
- 10 ibid

List of Artists

Adensamová, Blanka	b. 1948 Czechoslovakia
Ben Tré, Howard	b. 1949 United States
Bernstein, Richard	b. 1952 United States
Biggs, Bonnie	b. 1951 United States
Cook, John Heald	b. 1942 England
Cros, Henri	1840-1907 France
Despret, George	1862-1952 France
Dybka, Anne	working 1940's on, Australia
d'Illzach, Ringel	working late 1800's -mid 1900's France
Edwards, Stephen Dale	b. 1954 United States
Eisch, Erwin	b. 1927 Germany
Harcuba, Jiri	b. 1928 Czechoslovakia
Haufschild, Lutz	b. 1942 Canada
Kehlmann, Robert	b. 1942 United States
Lalique, René	1860-1945 France
Bretislav Novák, jr,	b. 1952 Czechoslovakia
Palusky, Robert	b. 1942 United States
Reekie, David	b. mid 1900's England
Roubicek, René	b. 1922 Czechoslovakia
Shepherd, Don	b. 1930 United States
Van Cline, Mary	b. 1930 United States
Wolff, Ann (Wärff)	b. 1937 Sweden
Zamenekova, Dana	b. 1945 Czechoslovakia

PLATES

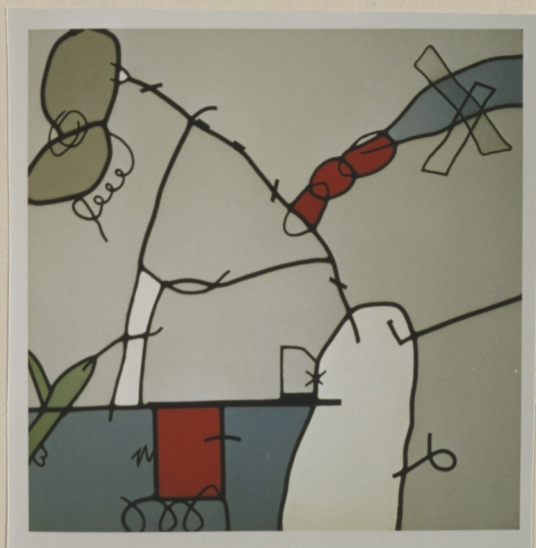
Plate 1	Bretislav Novák,jr	<u>Totem</u> 1980 227.6x35cm
Plate 2	Ben Tré, Howard	<u>Untitled 11</u> 1984 61x31"
Plate 3	Kehlmann, Robert	<u>Composition XXXI</u> 1976 75.7x74.7cm
Plate 4	Lalique, René	<u>Suzanne au Bain</u> 1925 23.5cm
Plate 5	Cros, Henri	<u>Water Nymph drawn by a Team of Sea Horses</u> c.1900 230mm
Plate 6	Dybka, Anne	<u>The Tempest</u>
Plate 7	Harcuba, Jiri	<u>Death Mask: Ludwig van Beethoven</u> 1977/8 15cm
Plate 8	Haufschild, Lutz	<u>Baseball</u> detail
Plate 9	Bernstein, Richard	<u>Sorry...He's Tied up at the Moment</u> 1990 5x4"
Plate 10	Zamenekova, Dana	<u>Two People</u> 1984 38x24x10cm
Plate 11	Van Cline, Mary	from <u>The Healing Series</u> 1987 91x41x20cm
Plate 12	Palusky, Robert	<u>Her Dream Was to Be a Journalist</u> 1987 16x9x4"
Plate 13	Wolff,Ann (Wärf)	title unknown 1988
Plate 14	Biggs, Bonnie	<u>Library Doors</u> detail
Plate 15	Edwards, Stephen Dale	<u>Awak</u> 1986 40.7x22.9cm



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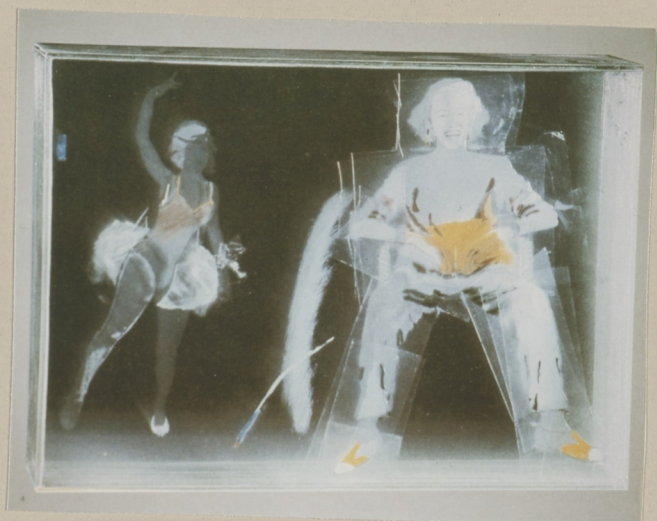
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Work' New Work Glass vno 34 summer 1988
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Van Cline'
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Magon, Bernstein Neues Glas vno 2 p 61-67 1982
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Neues Glas vno3 p206-10 Jul/Sept 1988
- Suda, Kristian 'Dana Zamenikova: Play of Space - Space of
Play'
Neues Glas vno4 p187-191 Oct/Dec 1984
- Tafel, Verena 'Discoveries and Changes: New Works by Ann
Wolff'
Neues Glas vno4 p258-265 Oct/Dec 1986